

## Can't Escape the Zydeco

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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The story of Stanley Dural Jr. is the story of a kid who hated his father's music. His dad was an accordion player, and he would play the instrument in their Louisiana home before and after his job as an auto mechanic. And at family gatherings, the accordion was accompanied by the washboard. Everywhere was the accordion, and zydeco music.

"I heard this all my life," Dural said last week in an interview. "That was enough of the accordion for me ... for a whole generation."

Stanley preferred the piano, and rock-and-roll. He recalled sitting on the steps of a club at age nine to hear Fats Domino. "I was too young to go inside the club," he said. "Kid got no business being in a nightclub."

The rich irony is that the kid who hated the accordion and zydeco would become the planet's best-known zydeco performer. His nickname is "Buckwheat," and the world knows him as Buckwheat Zydeco – a multiple Grammy nominee and the first zydeco artist ever signed to a major label. Dural and his band will perform on Saturday at the Rocket Theatre – the last event for the venue under current proprietor Devin Hansen. (Hansen announced Monday that he would be closing the Rocket at the end of the month because of financial hardship.)

Buckwheat initially followed his boogie-woogie, rock-and-roll muse, playing in bands starting at age nine. "I was restricted," the 58-year-old Dural said of his youthful musical endeavors. "On stage, and stay on stage, and when it's over with, get out [of] the building. ... If I wanted a Coke ... then it was brought to me." At intermission, he sat in the car until it was time to play again.

In 1971, Dural formed Buckwheat & the Hitchhikers, a heavy funk and R&B outfit for which he played Hammond B3 organ. Buckwheat's father never showed up for the group's gigs. "He didn't like my music, and I couldn't stand his," Dural said.

The band lasted until 1975, when Buckwheat tired of leading a 15-piece band: "Everybody knows what you should do, and you're the only one doing it."

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He took some time off, and in 1976 was invited to play organ with Clifton “King of Zydeco” Chenier in Buckwheat’s hometown of Lafayette, Louisiana.

Dural was intrigued. Paul “Lil’ Buck” Singeal – who now plays guitar for Buckwheat – performed with Chenier, he said, and “if Little Buck [was] going to play with Clifton Chenier, it can’t be that bad.”

He agreed to the tryout, but he already had an escape plan. “I’ll just get my organ in my van, go, put it on stage, perform with him, take it off, put it back in the van, say, ‘Now I’ve played zydeco and I *still* don’t like it,’” he recalled. “I was very stubborn then, and a very, very big critic of accordion music, zydeco music.”

But he wasn’t prepared for Chenier, and how different his music was from the accordion-and-washboard sounds of his childhood. Chenier’s band had drums, bass, guitar, sax, and a washboard “like a bulletproof vest,” along with Chenier’s accordion. “This music has so much energy, like the Hitchhikers,” he said. “The very first night I performed with Clifton Chenier, I wound up staying with him over two years.” Chenier’s high-energy Creole music was the template that Buckwheat has used for the past three decades.

And Dural’s dad was pleased. “We became best of friends,” Buckwheat said of his relationship with his father. “Every engagement I ever done [with Chenier], he was there. ... He had never seen me perform before, when I was doing the R&B funk.”

To this day, Dural thinks his dad might have tricked him. He and Chenier, after all, were friends.

“It was almost like a setup deal,” Buckwheat said. “That’s what I thought.” But he never asked his father – who is now deceased – whether his feeling was correct. “I respect him too much,” he said. “I would never question him. ... I would never go to him with that.”

After his stint as Chenier’s organist, Buckwheat left to pursue a new instrument: the accordion.

At first, he didn’t play it so much as wrestle with it. “I picked the accordion up, I go about three, four, five hours, and I get disturbed, and I put it down,” he said. “I said, ‘I really don’t want to play this thing.’”

But after eight months, he had the hang of it. And then, in October 1979, he tried to put together a second band. The process forced him to become a singer as well as an accordionist: “None of the good singers I know would touch me with a 10-foot pole. ‘Buckwheat goin’ crazy, man. ... Buck’s leaving the organ alone, and he’s going to play the accordion.’” Buckwheat, of course, can take satisfaction in knowing that the singers who turned him down probably regret that decision: “I’m not too crazy today.”

At first, Buckwheat played both the organ and the accordion with his new outfit, the IIs Sont Partis Band. “I wasn’t giving enough time to the accordion” on stage, he said, so he dropped the

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organ. "Next thing you know, I forgot about the organ."

In 1986, Buckwheat was signed to Island, the first time a zydeco act had ever been on any major label. Buckwheat Zydeco and his band have released more than a dozen albums in their more-than-25-year history – the last three on Buckwheat's own Tomorrow Recordings label.

But after 1997's *Trouble*, Buckwheat didn't release another studio recording until last year's *Jackpot!*

"I really didn't care about recording anymore," he said. That was certainly influenced by the Internet, and the fact that many people stopped paying for the music they listened to.

But he also felt he lost touch with his audience, people who want to hear something new from their favorite artists. "It was time for me to quit being selfish," he said.

*Jackpot!* was also an opportunity for Buckwheat to renew his acquaintance with an instrument he hadn't played in 20 years: the Hammond B3 organ. The album features nine songs with accordion, and a bluesy three-song "encore" featuring "Organic Buckwheat."

"I felt like I gave enough time to the accordion," he said.

But he's not giving up the accordion, which made him famous; he now plans on touring with both instruments.

At this point, there's no way Buckwheat can give up the accordion or zydeco without alienating his audience. And there's no getting around that zydeco's in his blood, and probably always has been. As Buckwheat said: "My dad was right all along."

*Buckwheat Zydeco will perform at the Rocket Theatre on Saturday, February 25. William Elliott Whitmore opens, and the show starts at 9 p.m. Tickets are \$18 in advance and \$20 the day of the show. For tickets or more information, visit <http://www.rockettheater.com>.*

*To download an audio version of the Reader interview with Buckwheat Zydeco (28 minutes, 7.8 megabytes, mp3), click [here](#).*